

Mountain's poetic name is suited to its majesty

7 Oct 1985

PROVO — Timpanogos has always been a beautiful name — as many Indian names are, despite the white man's attempt to gutturalize them. It still is a beautiful name to me, even if greater use and chance, plus perhaps some inadequate precautions over the years, have resulted in deaths and tragedies on the mountain.

The latest, of course, is the death of a high school student and injury to another, but this is not an attempt to discuss these particular instances. Over the years others have happened, about three deaths in one season years ago when hikers went heedlessly over solid-looking snow fields and broke through to crevasses.

But this column is not aimed at the mountain's tragedies, although they are on everyone's mind. It is to do with the name itself.

It is a genuine Indian name, but it does not mean what most people think. The spelling is not Indian. Indians, except the Cherokees and perhaps one or two others, had no written native language. Indian names are spelled the way the first white trapper or settler wrote them — or the way in which they got translated into English from the first Spanish writings of the Southwest, including Dominguez and Escalante. They wrote it as Timpanogotzis, referring to the Indians of the area (later known as the Utahs (or Eutaws, or Yutas) later shortened to Utes.



Theron
H. Luke

AS IT LOOKS
TO LUKE

Escalante and Dominguez also referred to them as fish-eaters, because they ate fish from Utah Lake (also first called Laguna de los Timpanogotzis by Escalante and Dominguez). But Timpanogos is not a Spanish word, according to Dr. Ted Warner, BYU Southwest Spanish expert. It had to be what the Indians called themselves and told the Spaniards. By this time their guide, a Ute who had received the Spanish name Sylvestre from them, had probably picked up enough Spanish to convey it. So the name eventually became, through white man's spelling and adaptation, Timpanogos. If some newspaperman would consistently misspell it long enough, it would probably change.

It means, roughly, rocky river, or rocky stream, or stony stream, according to Dr. Warner, Lyman Tyler, the late Dr. William R. Palmer, perhaps the best experts on the word. Timp or Timpe is Ute for rock or stone. Pa or Pah is the Ute root word for water. William R. Palmer believed the nogas is a corruption of form of the Paiute (again, the spelling differs with different white men) for running, although this was never really nailed down. So, rocky running river in at least a general form, is the meaning. It used to be the name for Provo River. It's on Howard Standbury's government map of 1849, the first or one of the first federal maps of the area. Later, and I've never learned just how, it became transferred to the mountain, and Provo River was named after Etienne Provost, an early French trapper who also gave the city his name.

What about the legend of the Sleeping Woman, and Utahna, and Red Eagle? The well-known Legend of Timpanogos? Eugene L. Roberts, long-time BYU coach and founder of the Timpanogos Hike in 1912, made it up out of whole cloth. I personally interviewed him before he died and he told me so himself. He told others too. He made it up one winter morning while sitting in his car outside the old Pleasant Grove High School while waiting to speak to the studentbody. He went in and told it, with some variations, and it became The Legend of Timpanogos. The Indians, or anyone else, never heard of it, until they heard his version.

It's like telling you there's no Santa Claus, but that's the way it was. The Sleeping Woman came, of course, from his imaginative outline on the mountain.

It is a white man's legend. Legends are fine, but they need to be taken for what they are.

It's a beautiful mountain, a Western landmark. A little more care needs to be taken by hikers, but let's keep it as it is.

I hope I haven't destroyed your Timpanogos testimony on the subject.

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